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The Best Life
by
Charles F. Thwing

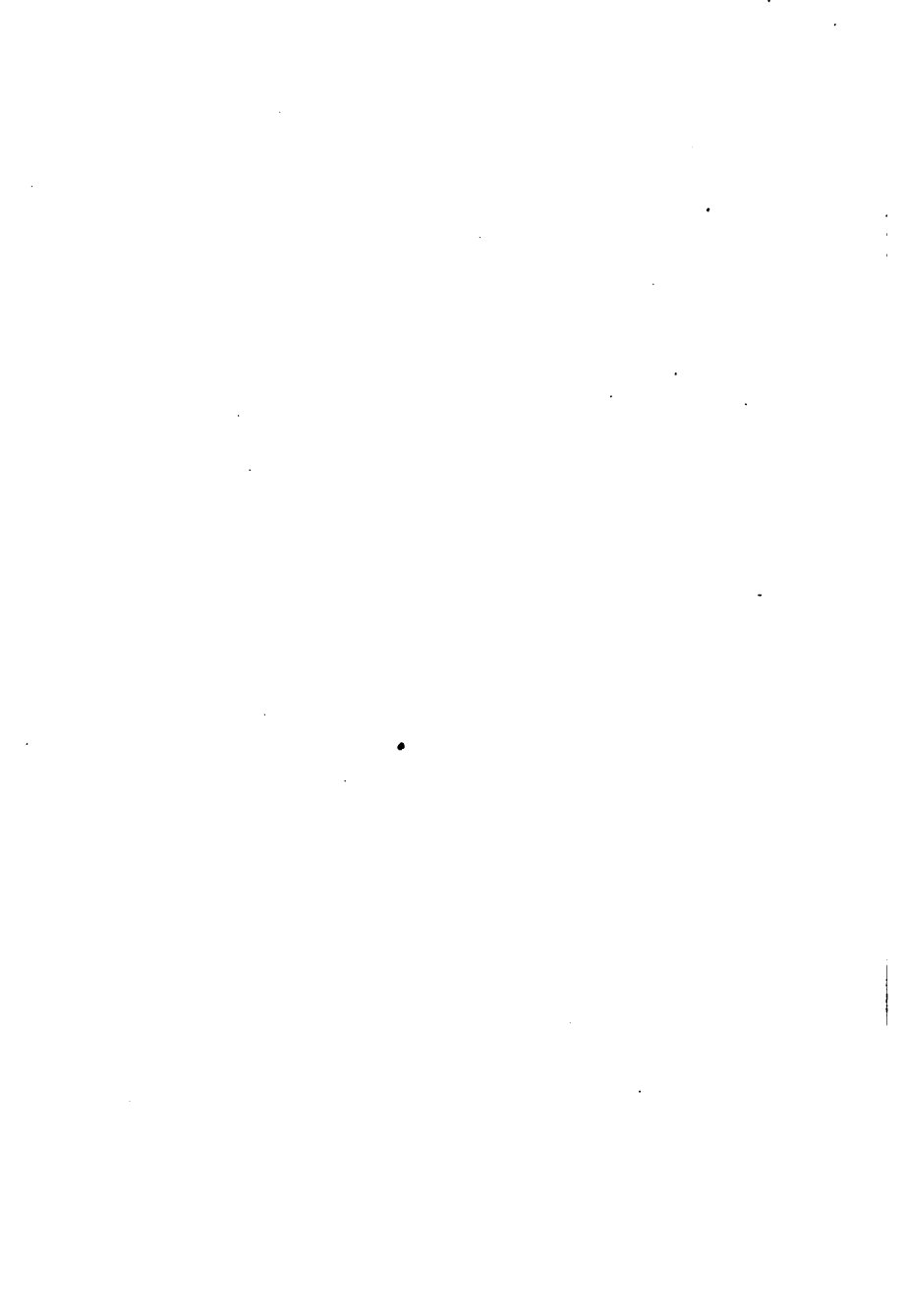
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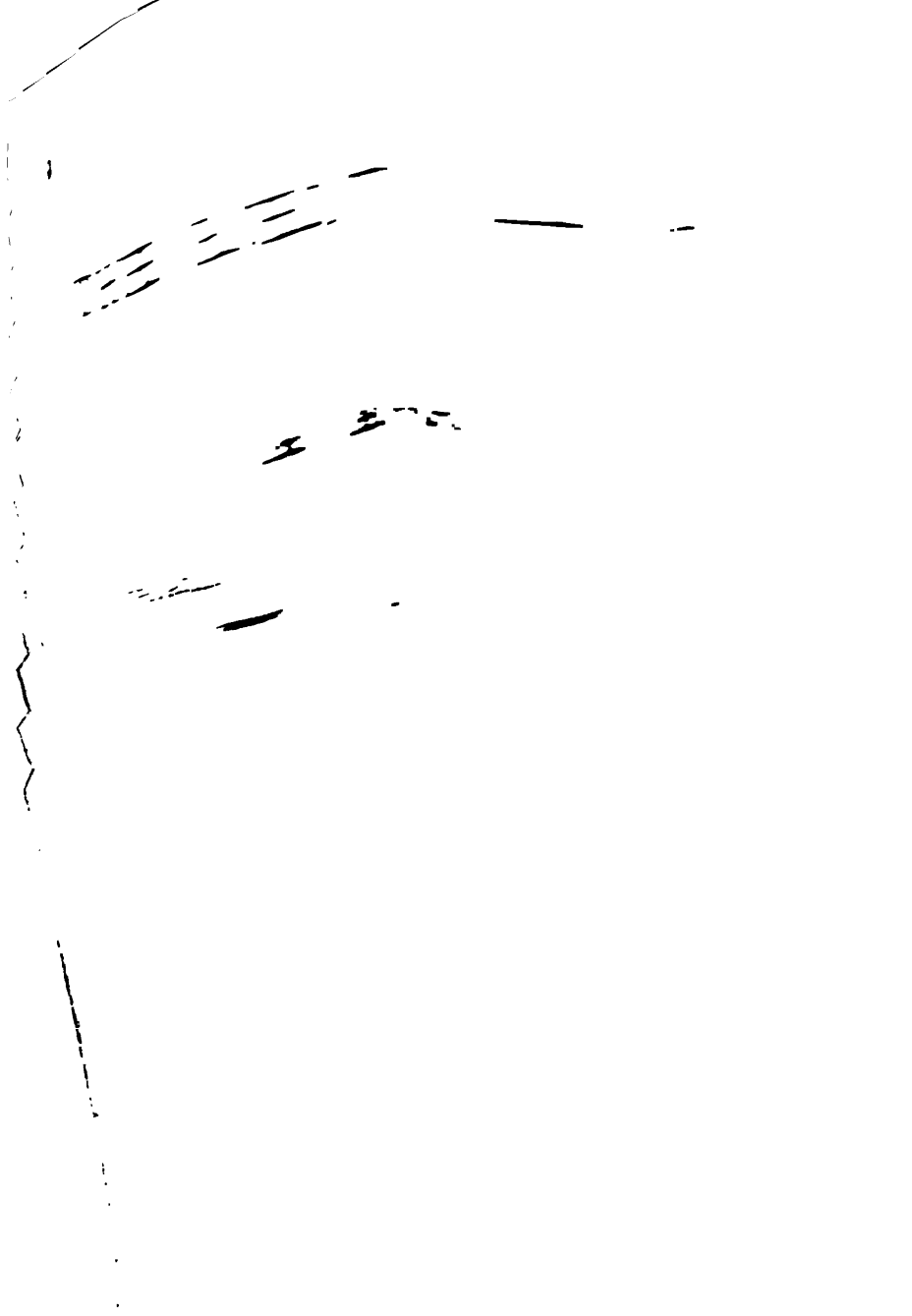
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THE BEST LIFE

An Address

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THE BEST LIFE.

THE best life. What is it?

My first answer is: It is the life of truth, the life that is spent in searching for, in holding, and in expressing, the truth. To inquire, to know, to tell: these are three phases or functions of our relation to what we call truth. The first command of the Bible is, "Let there be light;" and the first commendation of the Bible is, "And God saw the light, that it was good." Among the last declarations of the Apocalypse is that of the blessing that "And there shall be no night there," "for the Lord God giveth them light." Man's first appetite is for light, and there is no surer sign of dying than the coming of the twilight.

The mind of man is fitted for truth, and truth is fitted for the mind of man. The truth — I mean knowledge of things as they

are; I mean all things—things that appeal to the sense, things that we touch, things that we see, things whose voices we hear. The truth,—I mean the chemist's knowledge, whether it be of the laboratory or the kitchen. The truth,—I mean the physicist's knowledge, whether it be of the laboratory or of the machine-shop. The truth,—I mean the biologist's knowledge, whether of the laboratory or of the garden. Sensual truth, I mean; but I also mean supersensual truth. Truth,—the vision which the architect sees before sod is turned; his structure poised in mid-air, calm, self-contained, serving its purpose. Truth,—the picture which the artist sees with eyes shut, and which transfers itself to canvas. Truth,—the sweet and saintly, the mighty and majestic face, which the sculptor knows is buried up in the marble, and which he must release from its stony prison. Truth,—the song which the ear of the composer hears, beating its notes of harmony and of melody, memories as of some life lived long ago, and in some

other clime, and which must write themselves out in the score. Truth, — the poem which is singing itself in the brain and heart, soft and low, tumultuous as the epic or sobbing as the threnody, which for the hour makes the poet inspired. Truth, — the vision of the past, the noble army of martyrs, the procession of the ages, the widening of man's thoughts, the glories and the shames, the exultations and the pangs; the historian's truth, making one master of all that man has achieved or aspired after. Truth must be an element of the best life. It is not without significance that God is called Omniscience, and the devil the father of lies. Bishop Butler once said that he proposed to make the pursuit of truth his business. This same pursuit must be the business of any life that proposes unto itself to be the best. Truth is fundamental.

In the best life is also love, — love given and love received. Tucked away in the life of Dean Burgon is a letter of Bishop Hobhouse, who tells a story that was told to him

about that unique personality who goes into history as Dean Burgon. The narrator says :

“One day I looked up at yonder hill, and I saw Mr. B. at the top of it, with his hands over his head, a-waving his hat. He then spread out his arms as if he were clasping something to his breast. He ran down the hill, and began visiting from door to door. When he came to my house, I asked him, ‘What were you doing on the hill, waving your hands, spreading out your arms, and hugging them to your heart?’—‘Oh, I was just embracing you all, glad to find myself among you. I love you so much.’”¹

That is an emblem of the best life,—the man of truth on the hill-top, against the sky, between earth and heaven, embracing the people whom he loves and who love him. Love is spiritual gravitation. As material gravitation acts the stronger on larger and through larger bodies, so spiritual gravitation loves that which is more the more, and that which is most the

¹ “Life of Dean Burgon,” abridged, vol. i., p. 165.

most. But, unlike material gravitation, it recognizes no distances. It is love outpouring, out-giving, spending, sacrificing, just loving. For, as Emerson says, "The superiority that has no superior, the redeemer and instructor of souls, as it is their primal essence, is love."¹ And as Mrs. Browning, voicing the same thought in the closing lines of a sonnet, sings : —

"For life in perfect whole
And aim consummated is Love in sooth,
As nature's magnet-heat rounds pole with pole."

That love is God and that God is love we are coming to understand better and better. Philosophy has for more than two thousand years been searching for its god. Plato found it in his supreme ideal or idea. This century has been searching for it as never before has any age searched for a god. Fichte found his god in the "ego." Schelling found his god in his system of correspondence. Hegel found his god in pure being. Schopenhauer found his god in the absolute will. Von Hartmann found

¹ "Essays," II. 431.

his god in the unconscious. And each of these found, indeed, one side of God. God is the ideal, the perfect. God is the universal "ego." God makes himself known in the orders and gradations of existence. God is pure being. God is a force, a will. God we may consider as the unconscious in certain relations. But this God who is all these elements is also, comprehending all, the God of love. Love is the supreme ideal, love is personal, love is comprehensive, love is force, love is energy, love so goes out into other lives that it may be said to be forgetful of itself. Love is the Absolute. Love is God.

The best life is truth and love. Life with truth but without love may be splendid, articulate, magnificent, mighty, but it is monstrous—a Frankenstein. Life with love but without truth may be tender, peaceful, high in purpose, rihht in desire, noble, but it is misguided, unstable, unjust.

Love united with truth provides a new motive for all life. It adds power to life; it gives

to life buoyancy, spring, and movement. Love gives a new light. The heart clarifies the intellect. Love preaches a gospel of universal brotherhood without preaching communism. Love preaches a gospel of self-sacrifice without preaching annihilation. Love preaches optimism, the gospel of hope. Love never whispers a syllable of pessimism, the gospel of despair. Love joined with truth assures men that God dwells in them and about them; love convinces men that this world is God's, not the devil's, world; love whispers that the eternal spirit is working in and for man, that humanity represents the constant striving of God toward a reincarnation; love proves that conscience and reason in each man are to be united, and that the revelations of conscience and reason in man are the revelations of God's truth; love declares that the human need of forgiveness is filled by the divine pardon, that all worthy sacrifice consists in the yielding of the human will to the divine, and that perfect freedom is perfect obedience to perfect law.

Truth and love represent the mind that knows and the heart that loves. Such a life soars like the eagle, but, unlike the eagle, never destroys. It sings like the nightingale, but, unlike the nightingale, it needs no darkness for its expression. I am sure you may have thought that in the best life there must be beauty, and so there must be; but the beauty of the best life is the beauty of truth and of love. Can you think of a life possessing beauty higher, richer, nobler, more entrancing than the life which is founded in truth, and which aspires unto the skyey heights of love?

The preacher would call this best life of truth and of love Heaven. For is it not said that in that supersensual state "Shall I know even as also I am known"? And is not heaven where God is, and is not God love? And the worst life, is it not error, ignorance, blindness? is it not hate? The preacher would call it Hell. Is it not the outer darkness? and is it not symbolized rather by the wailing and gnashing of teeth than by the kiss of love?

Between the best life of knowing and of loving, and the worst, of not knowing and of hating, is another life, which consists in having, — in having fame, in having wealth, in having power of any kind. Yes, there is a life of having, which, with its manifold content, is precious; but can it be for one instant weighed in the same scale with this life which we call the life of truth and of love?

This best life of truth and of love is a life lived at once under law and in liberty. It recognizes the canons for searching, finding, holding, expressing, the truth. It does not forget that these laws are the laws of justice, order, courage, humility, reverence. It also recognizes the great condition of liberty. Each soul is to be obedient to itself, true to the still small voice within, heeding the tiny monitions as if they were thunders. It is a life, not of rashness, but of prudence; not of disorder, but of respect for fitnesses; not of undue meltings, of either laughter or tears, but of self-restraint. It is a life of self-sacrifice, but also of self-respect;

of self-respect, but also of sacrifice, of egoism and of altruism, of humanity and of divinity.

This life is what Mr. Matthew Arnold would call "perfection." It is the life which he has described essentially as "sweetness and light." Sweetness is love, light is truth. It is a life of and in culture. It is a life of the spirit. It belongs to those realities which are, if found in time and space, yet not of time and space. And it relates to those truths which "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man," but which in some form man sees in sweet and saintly lives, which he hears in the stories of sweet and saintly deeds, and which he finds in the hearts of the sweetest and saintliest.

I pause to say it is a source of profoundest joy that the life of the teacher and student is, above every other life, a life of truth and of love. Truth! Is not that the student's quest? Truth! Is not that the teacher's message? Love, too, is the mood, the will, of the teacher as he speaks to the receptive soul, and of the student as he receives the message

from the inspired messenger. Truth is the teacher's calling; love, the student's vocation. This life unites the inspiration of the prophet and the vision of the priest. It calls forth the exultation of the poet, the insight of the artist, and those capacities for inspiring and for being inspired which belong to the radiant and mighty souls who bring light out of the night.

The avenues leading to this best life of truth and of love are not difficult of approach. One of them I shall call by the name of personality.

Personality is what one is. It is one's entire being. It is reason and feeling and conscience and will. Personality stands apart from its attributes; it is distinct from activities and from the results of activity. Its might is the might of its constituent elements. Its force is the force of reason. For its worth consists in the mighty grasp of truth. Its vigor is the sense of reality. Its strength is the strength of the heart. For great lovers are great personalities. Its energy is the energy of the conscience, the insight into moral relations,

the impulse to do the right and to avoid the wrong, the approval for the right done. Insight, impulse, approval, are mighty in a great personality. Its power is the power of the will. Given a large, strong, persistent choice, and you have a strong, large, lasting personality. Personality is the greatest power in life. On general grounds one would expect that personality would be a great power in life; for personality represents the splendid crown of all the creative, preservative, and developing processes. To compare its brilliancy, its creative power, its being, to star or sun, is to debase its nature, so brilliant, so creative, so powerful is it. It stands last in the period of Genesis; it gives name to all the preceding creations. It stands last in the Book of Revelation; its blessing is the last blessing pronounced. It represents God in the earth.

The best life to which personality leads comes forth from the best life. To the student searching for the best life, I say live with those who live the life of truth and of love. "*Similia*

similibus creantur." Personality is a great power. Great men make great men; small, small. Some months ago I asked several of the wisest men in America, "What was the best thing your college did for you?" Answer after answer came back, "The great men who taught me." "Mark Hopkins," said one; "Julius H. Seelye," said another. The teachings may be forgotten, the teachers never.

The great actors in American affairs have usually been great personalities. We are now closing the first century of our national life. Call over the roll of the great men in law and jurisprudence, Marshall and Jay and David Dudley Field; in government, Washington and Lincoln; in romance, Hawthorne and Cooper; in poetry, Lowell and Longfellow; in preaching, Brooks and Beecher; in statesmanship, Webster; in finance, Gallatin and Chase; in history, Prescott and Parkman and Motley and Bancroft; in science, Agassiz and Gray and Henry and Dana; in diplomacy, the Adamses and Jefferson; in architecture, Richardson; in

painting, Hunt and Copley and Inness ; in journalism, Greeley ; in reformation, Garrison and his associates. They are all great MEN. Beneath and before the artist, the statesman, the scholar, is the man. Great personalities constitute great doers. But what is to my point now is great personalities make great personalities ; best personalities make best personalities ; truth, truth ; love, love. The power of even one personality in leading to the best life is simply magnificent. Socrates left no writings, he left a Plato. Christ left no writings, he left a Saint John. The two men who have most deeply moved modern Oxford are Benjamin Jowett and T. H. Green. Greater scholars than either there have been, but no greater personalities. The regard which certain minds have felt for them has become almost religious. The American college is a power in scholarship ; it establishes great libraries ; it equips noble laboratories ; it enrolls great scholars. But the American college is also a power in forming great personalities.

It therefore must have great personalities as its members. If one were obliged to choose between, on the one hand, a great scholar and a small personality, and, on the other hand, between a great personality and the mean scholar, of course the decision would be in favor of the great man. But the narrowness of choice is seldom or never imposed; for, of course, a great personality tends to create a great scholar, and great scholarship tends to create a great personality. A single man, a personality of truth and of love, may create the best life in hundreds of souls. This power of personality to create the best personality is what Browning is forever trying to tell us, the blind readers of his blind books. It is, I suppose also, the truth which lies at the basis of Sir Richard Steele's remark made in respect to Lady Elizabeth Hastings, "to love her was a liberal education." That intimacy of companionship which love represents gave to life breadth and depth and height, so broad and high and deep was her own nature.

If a method of entering into this best life of truth and of life lies through a vital relationship with a single great personality, a second method may be found in a vital association with a still greater personality, which is humanity itself. Humanity is the greatest of all conditions; therefore, let one enter into humanity and possess it, and let humanity enter into one's self. I notice that the men whom we most admire are usually most human. Mankind likes to make its heroes by the divine method of creation,—in its own image. This humanity may emerge in an intense sympathy with the religious problems of the time, as in Tennyson; the humanity may be manifested in an appreciation of the ethical problems of one's age, as in Browning; the humanity may be displayed in a large fellowship with the higher forms of the intellectual life of its period, as in Lowell; the humanity may show itself in a deep feeling with the common difficulties of our common life, as in the gentle Quaker poet.

No matter in what form of application hu-

manity meets humanity, it is still true that a man, in order to reach the best life, must struggle up to it through knowing and feeling with humanity itself. The lives that are the best lives are, in the equality of all interests, the lives which are lived most closely and vitally with men. It is therefore necessary to put one's self into the closest relations with humanity. Life is measured by the variety and intensity of its relations. If, therefore, life is to be the best life, it must be varied and intense. All that interests humanity should interest each member of humanity. Be a pessimist, if one must be,—believe it to be true, "Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne." Be a meliorist, if that seems wiser,—believe that things, on the whole, do tend toward goodness and betterment. Be an optimist, if you see your way clear to that consummation,—believe that "Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own." But, at all events, you are to believe in humanity; and if you

believe in humanity, you will find yourself becoming largely and magnificently human. For, going out into humanity, you will find humanity coming into you; its truth you will know; its love you will possess and enjoy.

The greatest and best of men are always *humanitarians*; they have a genius for humanity. Higher than the fame of their poems, or novels, or essays, or pictures, or wars, or explorations, or inventions, or battles, is their sheer, simple, and comprehensive manhood. It comes upon us almost as a surprise, meeting for the first time a distinguished author or explorer, to find that his distinction is not the fundamental note in his character, but that the fundamental note is his sheer, abounding humanity. Such must be the case. Manhood is necessarily the key-note of the being of every great one. The best life must be a very human life. "Waverley" keeps its place with the successive generations,—the delight of the boy, the satisfaction of the mature,—because it is so comprehensively human.

A third method of entrance to this best life of truth and love I shall denominate the method of objective personality, and by this I mean the book. For it is impossible for us to overestimate the book as the precious storehouse of the most precious things which each generation creates, and which it transmits to its successors. The book has come to be to us what the cathedral and the picture were to the Middle Ages. It embalms the noblest thought of the noblest spirits about the noblest things. "They — i.e., books — are," says Emerson, "the finest records of human wit;" and they are, in that fine and familiar phrase of Milton, "the precious life-blood of a master spirit." Into them has been poured this life-blood, and they therefore give life to those who drink of them. "Parnassus," says Jean Paul Richter, "gives a wider prospect than the throne." Macaulay, in writing to a little girl, many years ago, said, "If anybody would make me the greatest king that ever lived, with palaces and gardens and fine dinners, and wine and coaches, and beautiful

clothes, and hundreds of servants, on condition that I would not read books, I would not be a king. I would rather be a poor man in a garret with plenty of books, than a king who did not love reading.”¹

Of all classes of books which may help one into this life of truth and love, two are, to my thought, eminent, the biography and the poem. One of the conspicuous contributions of our fast-flying century to universal literature lies in its biographies. No century has seen the printing of so many great books about great men. If we are prevented in our narrow station from knowing personally great men while they are alive, we are privileged to know them after they are dead. On his first reading of Niebuhr's "History of Rome," Dr. Arnold said that "it opened wide before my eyes the extent of my own ignorance." But a biography may open a soul unto itself, unto its possibilities, through the self-revelations of another soul.

We all are holding our convictions at once

¹ "Macaulay's Life and Letters," II. 180.

with greater loyalty and with greater toleration because we have entered into the home and heart of England's great schoolmaster, led by the warm hand of Arthur Stanley. We are seeing visions of truth more clearly, and are finding greater strength in doing our duty, because we have suffered and rejoiced with the mighty Brighton preacher introduced by the noble Brooke. Every man of us is more genial, more gentle, more humane, through a personal acquaintance with the great Whig historian, made through his nephew, Trevelyan. Truth has become dearer, its quest more glorious, its visions more sacred, for our being with him who prayed for "kindly light amid the encircling gloom."

No books are so fragrant of holiest things, so suggestive of wide realms of richest truth, so preservative of the precious achievements of the past, so moving to the willing spirit, so gracious, so vocal with messages of the prophet and the song of the poet, so instructive as to the methods and ways of the noblest men, as the books which tell the story of the best

English scholars and thinkers and writers of this century of ours.

But the poem offers a method quite as acceptable for entering into this richest life. The poem is the book of truth, and it is also the book of love. The poet is the seer. He looks into the inmost heart. Beneath the phenomenal he seeks the real, the essential. But he is also the lover. He cannot be the hater. Hatred, as a positive quality, and poetry are remote from each other. The poet is the lover of humanity; he is the lover of nature. Of all the poems of the ancient world, the Greek tragedies lead one into this best life the most easily and deeply. For in these tragedies the mysteries of existence, the shrinking yet bold, the bold yet shrinking, attempts at solving the awful riddles of our being, the dismay of man before the ineffable realities, the sadness and pathos, the endeavor of man to lift himself up to the highest communing with highest things, the peace of heart that belongs to the soul obedient to itself and to the

unknown powers, are found in these greatest dramas. They move the spirit into truth and love as no other literature of its kind of any age does move. The three poems which, of our own century, seem to me best fitted to lead men into this best life, which stir the deepest, which come to the lip and the heart in crises of being, which go down the deepest and up the highest in our whole character, are "Intimations of Immortality," "In Memoriam," and the "Commemoration Ode." Whoever translates these verses into his own heart's blood will know the best which this century can teach him about the truth, the essential truth which lives in man, and for which man lives and dies; and about love, love which is but another way of spelling life.

"There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away;
Nor any courser like a page
Of prancing poetry.
This traverse may the poorest take,
Without oppress of toll.
How frugal is the chariot
That bears the human soul!"

Another path leading to this best life I shall call spiritual communion with nature. In this dying century have arisen three great movements in respect to the relation of man to nature. There has been a growth in the poetic interpretation of nature. Of course, the poetic interpretation of nature has been not uncommon from the time when the author of the Book of Job reasoned, or when David sang. But in the progress of this century man has entered into the heart of nature. Above every one it is the hand of Wordsworth that has pointed out the way. In these hundred years we have come to interpret nature in a more diverse, more comprehensive, more vital, way than in any other period of human history. With this poetic interpretation has gone along a scientific interpretation. The first laboratories were built in the first years of the nineteenth century; the chemical were the earliest, and they were succeeded by the great physical laboratories, and these in turn by the biological. Following the scientific interpretation, as the

scientific followed the poetic, has occurred what I may call the practical interpretation of nature, — the use of nature for the sake of the comfort, the happiness, and the improvement of man. This form of interpretation and application is represented largely in the park, the boulevard, the roadway. Going along with these three interpretations, — the poetic, scientific, practical, — is the spiritual interpretation. Man has come to put himself, a spiritual being, into relation with this being that we call Nature, thinking of her as a spiritual being. He has flung his own thought and imagination and soul into Nature herself. Irving, in the "Sketch Book," speaks of the moral quality of the English landscape. It is not a moral quality only which the devout soul attributes to the landscape, but a human, a spiritual quality as well. Nature takes us to her inmost heart, and we take Nature also to the very centre of our being. This spiritual communion with Nature is based in a peculiar degree, like the scientific, upon her absolute truthfulness. Na-

ture speaks the truth. She is also beneficent and loving as well, provided only that you take her at her best, and work with her in her own way. Give yourself to her, and she gives herself to you. You will find in her what you most wish to find. You will find in her what you bring to her. Like makes and like finds like. Minister to her in honesty, and she will deal truly with thee; cherish her in love, and she will reward thee. Her seas will sob in thy cryings, her winds chant dirges in thy sorrows, her skies drop tears in thy weepings, her clouds drift in darkness in thy doubt. Her suns shall rise in thy strength, her stars shine in thy nights, her zephyrs sing in thy happiness, her forests chant oratorios in thy worship, her whole being throb in the progress of thy spirit. Know this world, commune with her varied moods, love her. She will give thyself to thee as a bride, and enrich thee.

I now come to the fifth avenue of approach to this best life. It is the last in which I

shall ask you to go with me. It is what I shall call the way of religion. "If your eye is on the eternal," says the great Emerson, "your intellect will grow, and your opinions and actions will have a beauty which no learning or combined advantages of other men can rival."¹ Let us recur to our simple definition of the content of the best life. It is the life of truth and of love. The higher and the richer the truth, and the nobler and finer the love, the higher and the richer, the nobler and the finer, the consequent life. Religion has for the two points of its great ellipse truth and love. Its truths are the highest and the richest, and they are also the profoundest truths of the origin of things and of human duty. They are the highest truths of a divine Being, and of his relation to the creation. They are the widest truths, which are not confined to space or to time. Religion has to do, too, with love. Love is the fulfilling of its law. Love, the self-sacrifice of Buddha; love, the golden

¹ "*Essays*," II. 431.

rule of the Chinese sage ; love, the principle of the religion of humanity ; love, the essence of the Christian's God,—love is religion. The religious man is the man of truth, highest and richest ; of love, noblest and finest ; he is the man who lives the best life. Beyond or above or below the theanthropic conceptions of the Hebrew ; beyond or above or below the specific doctrines of the Romanist ; beyond or above or below the philosophies of the Calvinist ; even beyond or above or below Christianity itself, narrowly interpreted,—is religion, religion of truth and of love. Whoever is not religious misses the greatest motives and powers and ministries helping him to the best life. Whoever does not have the highest truth and feel the noblest emotions has lost the best out of his being. Knowledge may fail to enlighten, argument may fail to convince,—we can only drop a tear and pass on. He has the help of personalities, he has the help of humanity, he has the help of books, he has the help of communing with nature, and with all

these aids he can come into the best life open to him. But it is a life less worthy than the best which is open to some other men. Religion gives a *sky*. Religion removes life from limitations, removes limitations from life, lifts from the spaces into space, from the times into time. Whoever accepts its truth of truths and its love seems to become one with the glorious company of the apostles of every age and clime. He is made an associate in the goodly fellowship of the prophets who have spoken truth and wrought righteousness. He lives the cathedral life, into which are poured the prayers and deeds of saintly and strong souls, whose aspirations are as spires and towers, that, if beginning in the earth, point skyward, and whose strength is as a buttressed wall.

For us, teachers and students, this life of truth and love is more easily open than to some other men. We are searching for the truth in love. We are holding the truth in love. We are speaking the truth in love. Happy those men whose professional work

leads them into those paths which are of the highest personal pleasantness. Herein duty is its own sweetness. The honeycomb of toil carries its own nectar in its own well-wrought cell. As a means to this best life, personality begets to itself dignity and sweetness; humanity becomes of unwonted but fitting worth; the book in its service becomes persuasive and vital; nature in star and sun and "crimson-tipped flower" takes on divine relations; religion becomes human in this the highest quest: all life itself ministers unto the bettering of each life. It is thus that at last comes to pass a condition which Saint Augustine interprets in a paragraph quoted by Mr. Matthew Arnold in a famous essay: "For the old order is passed, and the new arises; the night is spent, the day is come forth; and thou shalt crown the year with thy blessing, when thou shalt send forth laborers into the harvest sown by other hands than theirs; when thou shalt send forth new laborers to new seed-times, whereof the harvest shall not be yet."

